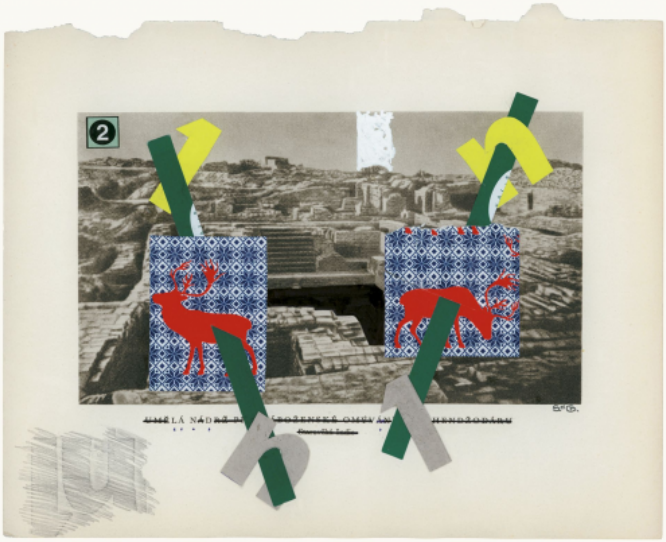

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Nick Land – An Experiment in Inhumanism

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Nick Land was a British philosopher but is no longer, though he is not dead. The almost neurotic fervor with which he scratched at the scars of reality has seduced more than a few promising academics onto the path of art that offends in its originality. The texts that he has left behind are reliably revolting and boring, and impel us to castrate their categorization as "mere" literature.

According to the present-day Nick Land, the person who wrote the following texts no longer exists. Yet for anyone who knew him, it is difficult to speak about these works without recalling Land as he was then. Not because one wishes to promote a personality cult around Land (something he himself was accused of at the time), but to emphasize that they are the residuum of a series of experiments. 'Thought-experiments,' but not the sort that philosophers conduct from the comfort of their armchairs: For the Land who penned these texts was one of those few thinkers who was prepared to let thought take him beyond such contemplative comforts; to put himself at risk in the name of philosophy – even if, in the process, he would repudiate that ancient name, along with its traditions.

As Iain Hamilton Grant (a former student of Land's, now an important philosopher in his own right) says: 'In the last half of the twentieth century, academics talked endlessly about the outside, but no-one went there. Land, by exemplary contrast, made experiments in the unknown unavoidable for a philosophy caught in the abstractive howl of post-political cybernetics.' Land courted the 'outside' of philosophy, combining it with other disciplines – from nanotechnology to occultism, from computation to anthropology. But he sought the 'outside' in a more radical sense, for this interdisciplinary exploration was undertaken in view of one sole aim: to escape the anthropic conservatism of 'philosophical thought,' itself grafted from common sense, in turn the product of evolutionary processes whose contingencies were determined by the geological history of the planet. Land's struggle against what he called the 'Human Security System' – the net result of this crushing cosmic legacy of 'stratification,' normalizing and limiting what thought can do – made it necessary to tirelessly search for

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Je zvykem literátů jména reálných postav či dokonce míst a institucí z různě motivovaných ohledů měnit či komolit. Popis reálného, ač většinou satirizovaného, chování takových postav a institucí a i ostatní jejich projevy se tak ukrývají za pseudonymy stejně jako se tamtéž ukrývá autor před pěstmi či právníky svých literárních předloh. Tato zkušenost mě už několik let nezajímá. Zajímá mě podávat pod autentickými jmény konkrétních osob a institucí svou představu jejich chování a projevů, s častým odhlédnutím od známého kontextu, podrobovat je satirizování, pamfletizování, dehonestování nebo naopak idealizování a vytvářet tak nový druh rozměrného pseudonymu na druhé straně dvojtečky. V této hře je tento princip uplatněn v nejvyšší míře (jen v případě pana

new perspectives. How else to prosecute such an impossible combat against thought's incarceration in the cosmically-reactionary forms of the social, the institutional, the personal, and the philosophical?

When I arrived, in 1992, at Warwick University – a dour, concrete campus set in the UK's grey and drizzling Midlands – I was a callow and nervous teenager, also filled with the hope that philosophy would afford me access to some kind of 'outside' – or at the very least, some intellectual adventure. Almost entirely overcome with disappointment and horror at the reality of academic life within weeks, it was a relief to meet one lecturer who would, at last, say things that really made sense: *Think of life as an open wound, which you poke with a stick to amuse yourself*. Or: *Philosophy is only about one thing: making trouble*. Land was tolerant of my hanging out in his office smoking and drinking coffee, as he (habitually hyperexcited and quivering with stimulants) worked on his comically antiquated green-screen Amstrad computer, and eagerly relayed the latest insights he had garnered from molecular biology, nanotechnology or neuroscience. One could not help but be impressed by the sense of a man whose entire being was invested in his work; for whom philosophy was neither a nine-to-five affair nor a straightforwardly life-affirming labor; and who took seriously the ridiculously megalomaniacal aspiration of philosophy to synopsize everything that is known into a grand speculative framework. He was uniquely able to open up students' minds to the conceptual resources of the history of philosophy in a way that made philosophical thinking seem urgent and concrete: a cache of weapons for 'making trouble,' a toolkit for *escaping* from everything dismal, inhibiting and tedious.

Before I met Land, I already knew of him through the gossip of new undergraduates taken aback by what they had heard on the grapevine: Did Land *really* claim that he had come back from the dead? Did he *really* think he was an android sent from the future to terminate human security? In person he belied these outrageous claims (both of which he did indeed make in writing), being thoroughly polite and amiable and, above all, willing to engage in earnest conversation with anyone. He had paid his philosophical dues and could hold his own in a discussion with any professor; these discussions often turning vituperative, however, as Land railed against the institution and its conservatism. But he preferred to spend his time in the bar with undergraduates, always buying the drinks, smoking continually, and conversing animatedly (and where possible, vehemently) about any topic whatsoever.

Land was perhaps not the greatest teacher from the point of view of obtaining a sober and solid grounding in one's subject – but more importantly, his lectures had about them a genuine air of excitement – more like Deleuze at the Sorbonne in '68 than the dreary courses in Epistemology one had to endure at a provincial British university in the 90s. Not only was the course he taught pointedly entitled '*Current* French Philosophy' – a currency otherwise alien to our curriculum — more importantly, Land's teaching was also a sharing of his own research-in-progress. This was unheard-of: philosophy actually *being done*, rather than being interpreted at second-hand?! He would sweep his audience into a speculative vortex of philosophy, economics, literature, biology, technology, and disciplines as-yet unnamed – before immobilizing them again with some startling claim or gnomic declaration. And as Land spoke, he prowled the classroom, sometimes clambering absentmindedly over the common-room chairs like an outlandish mountain goat, sometimes poised squatting on the seat of a chair like an overgrown mantis.

For Land, everything began with Kant – whose 'critique' he read as a kind of unconscious dramatisation of the confrontation between social conservatism and the corrosive powers of Capital; and continued through the savage outgrowths of Kantian critique developed by Nietzsche, Schopenhauer, and Bataille, who prioritised problematisation and troublemaking over order. He had been intensively schooled in Heidegger and deconstructive thinking, which he was liable to be dismissive of, although their basic ambitions continued to inhabit his work. But he would find his chief inspiration in Deleuze and Guattari's ambitious 'universal history of contingency,' *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, which he sought to

doktora Zdeňka Mahlera jsem podlehl vábení kouzelného pseudonymu Profesor Malér, jehož autorství budiž tu připsáno Vikimu Shockovi) a proto, vědom si jeho problematičnosti především v osobní rovině, přistupuji ke své práci vždy s vysokou uměleckou odpovědností a naplněn dobrou vůlí.

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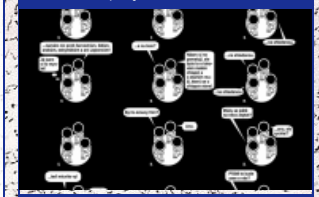

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extract from its French-philosophical, soixante-huitard political matrix. According to Land, this work packed a conceptual charge fit to blow apart its still too traditionally 'political' ambitions.

His early work already displayed philosophical brilliance and an energetic sense of purpose (impatience, even) in relation to these philosophical sources. But at a certain point in the mid-90s, it was as if someone had thrown a switch, rerouting Land away from any known circuit of philosophical study, and sending a new energy coursing through his writing that changed its form, style and content – making the three virtually indistinguishable, in fact. Increasingly alien elements were amalgamated with his philosophical argumentation, which increasingly drew on the more extravagant exponents of post-structuralism (Deleuze and Guattari, Lyotard's 'Libidinal Economy'), giving rise to an entirely new genre of 'theory-fiction.' Through this new form, Land effectively reignited what he saw as being the fundamental stakes of Heideggerianism, structuralism and poststructuralism: the staging of a 'break-out' from the history of Western thought. A renewed effort that was necessary since, despite themselves, those philosophical movements had delivered their nascent antihumanism back into the comfortable hands of an institutionally-sanctioned priesthood – that precious, contemplative, delibidinized francophile cult of 'Continental Philosophy' that emerged triumphant in the Anglophone academy of the 1990s.

Land's search for another way to think thus took the form of an experimentation *with* writing; but it also went *beyond* writing. The quest for some 'signal' that was not merely the repugnant narcissistic reflection of the Human Security System would demand a total disregard of normative method. Land sought channels of communication with the 'outside' not in an interminable and internal critique of philosophical texts, but in popular culture: in the sensibilities of the first generation to have grown up surrounded by technology; in the cyberpunk extrapolations made by authors such as William Gibson who observed that generation's 'reprogramming'; in the futureshock narratives of movies such as *Terminator, Bladerunner* and *Videodrome*; and in the rhythmic re-formattings of the body in dance culture and the hybrid, cut-up antilanguage of the digitised sonics that fueled it (especially Jungle, just emerging in the mid-90s). In these practices Land saw *thanatos* – the death-drive, the unknown outside – insinuating its way into the human by way of *eros*. The unbridled production of new brands of erotic adventure within capitalism ushered in a transformation of the human, cutting its bonds with the (cultural, familial, and ultimately biological) past and opening it up to new, inorganic distributions of affect. Compared to the *known* – the strata of organic redundancy in which 'the human' was interred – such *unknowns* were to be unhesitatingly affirmed. And philosophical thought also had to hook up with *eros* if it sought to engage with these new possibilities. Consequently, rather than simply writing *about* these things, Land proposed to unlock the forces of dehumanisation they mobilised, and to distil them in the form of 'experimental microcultures': to intensify capitalism's undoing of language through new practices of writing, speaking, and thinking, but also by reconnecting the body to its 'molecular' undercurrents, loosening-up the physical and vocal constitution that locked it into the regime of signification.[1]

In taking this approach, Land not only renounced the respect of his academic peers, but many times even lost the confidence of his supporters, as he sought by any means possible to drill through the sedimented layers of normative human comportment. Strange scenes ensued: A seminar on *A Thousand Plateaus* where a group of nonplussed graduates were encouraged to 'read' the chapter titles of the book by turning them into acronyms that were then plotted as vectors on a diagram of a QWERTY keyboard ('qwertopology'); A three-week long experiment in refusing to speak in the first person, instead referring to the collective entity 'Cur' (comprising the hardcore participants in 'Current French Philosophy,' who extended the lectures into a continual movable seminar); and, most memorably, a presentation at the conference *Virtual Futures* in 1996: Rather than reading a paper, in this collaboration with artist collective Orphan Drift, under the name of 'DogHead SurGeri,'[2] and complete with jungle soundtrack, Land lay behind the stage, flat on the floor (a 'snake-

becoming' forming the first stage of bodily destratification), croaking enigmatic invocations intercut with sections from Artaud's asylum poems. In this delirious vocal telegraphy, meaning seemed to disintegrate into sheer phonetic matter, melting into the cut-up beats and acting directly on the subconscious. As Land began to speak in his strange, choked-off voice (perhaps that 'absurdly high pitched ... tone ... ancient demonists described as 'silvery,' which he later reports being taunted by),[3] the disconcerted audience begin to giggle; the demon voice wavered slightly until Land's sense of mission overcame his momentary self-consciousness; and as the 'performance' continued the audience fell silent, eyeing each other uncertainly as if they had walked into a funeral by mistake. Embarrassment was regarded by Land as just one of the rudimentary inhibitions that had to be broken down in order to explore the unknown – in contrast to the forces of academic domestication, which normalised by fostering a sense of inadequacy and shame before the Masters, before the edifice of what is yet to be learnt.

Perhaps as a result of this maximally broad conception of 'philosophy,' of my fellow students of the time only a few now hold academic positions (and usually in precariously marginal positions, or at art schools rather than in philosophy departments). On the other hand, I can count among them novelists (Hari Kunzru, James Flint), musicians (Kode9, one of the progenitors of 'dubstep'), and writers such as Mark Fisher (blogger 'K-Punk,' author of *Capitalist Realism*).[4] Others have sought out Land from afar, like Iranian writer Reza Negarestani, who tracked him down on the web and began a long-running online conversation which led to the writing of the extraordinary book *Cyclonopedia*.[5]

At the time, the happenings at Warwick also attracted interested parties from outside the student body: Russell Haswell, now a renowned sound artist and DJ, remembers being drawn in from the nearby city of Coventry by rumours of the strange ideas that were being aired by Land and others. Now-globally-acclaimed artists Jake and Dinos Chapman discovered Land's work and in 1996 commissioned him to write a text for the catalogue of their first major show at the ICA in London. One of their prints now (dis)graces the cover of *Fanged Noumena*.

In 1995, with the arrival at Warwick of Sadie Plant (author of situationist history *The Most Radical Gesture* and 'cyberfeminist' manual *Zeros and* Ones), Land's experimental activities found a temporary institutional base in the Cybernetic Culture Research Unit (CCRU), a student-run research group of uncertain status, and which, upon Plant's rather swift departure, the Philosophy department would deny had ever existed.[6] Both within the university and elsewhere, the CCRU organised events and interventions – 'Virotechnics,' 'Swarmachines,' 'Afrofutures' – in which theory was used as an element alongside music, art and performance, but always with the backbone of an essentially 'Landian' combination of conceptual rigour and experimental method. They self-published an eclectic pamphlet series *Abstract Culture* – described in music magazine *The Wire* as 'a flow of conceptual disturbance in which unforeseen recognitions flash up like alien snapshots of a familiar world.' One of the *Abstract Culture* series ('swarms') included Land's classic text 'Meltdown,' with its invocation of apocalyptic planetary techno-singularity – its dark anticipative delight a nihilistic riposte to the ascendant Californian cyber-optimism of *Wired* magazine.

Land, increasingly claiming that he was inhabited by various 'entities' – *Cur, Vauung*, *Can Sah* – joined the CCRU in developing a number of quasi-lovecraftian mythologies or 'hyperstitions.' These included a fictional personification of the CCRU collective itself, in the shape of cryptographer Professor Daniel Barker. Barker, a descendent of *A Thousand Plateaus*' Professor Challenger (himself a 'hyperstitional' appropriation of a Conan Doyle character) was said to have developed the 'Cosmic Theory of Geotrauma,' which combines Freud's theory of trauma with a syncretic perspective on the natural history of the planet. A sketch of a fictional speculative system, 'geotraumatics' draws on everything from geology and microbial evolution to human biology and vocalisation, reinterpreting Earth-history as a series of nested traumas of which human subjectivity is

the symptom. 'Barker' sought to hybridize Nietzschean genealogy, DeleuzoGuattarian stratoanalysis and information theory in order to 'decipher' this cosmic pain: creating a schizoanalytic geocryptography to replace oedipal psychoanalysis.

In works from this period, Land's anti-humanist speculation is combined with a delight in wordplay and a renewed appreciation for the anthropological, mythological and psychoanalytical sources of *Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. He delighted in 'melting' into the CCRU collective, and the latter undoubtedly succeeded as a 'microculture.' Their unattributable, arcane writings, telling of strange inhuman entities, hyperstitional personages and syncretic pantheons, are uniquely disturbing and compelling: it is as if the group had collectively accessed hitherto undiscovered realms of bizarre archetypes. They successfully smeared the line between the real and what they called the 'hyperstitional': fictions that make themselves real through collective practice.

Eventually, however, Land would peel off from CCRU, as all of this intellectual hybridisation and microcultural activity found a concentrated, schematic form in a thinking and a practice of what Deleuze and Guattari had outlined, rather vaguely, in *A Thousand Plateaus*, as 'nomad numbering.' Digital technology, according to Land, unveiled a side of numbers that subtracted them completely from the power-structures of meaning and signification that made language a prison-house for thought; it even removed numbers from the stratified realms of mathematics, into a pure, flat plane of immanent materiality inhabited only by 'tics.' Accelerating 'in-silico' Capital's planetary experiment of 'tacking' human culture onto these tic-numbers so as to tear it apart, Land believed, would allow him to complete what deconstruction could only gesture at in its endless cycles of philosophical titillation: It would dismantle the power institutionalized in language and sense, and open up a reliable communication line with something unknown – a pure material dispersion not preprocessed by models derived from the past.

Land would increasingly be found, having taken the very minimum amount of sleep possible (by this point he lived in his office), pursuing intense 'mechanomical' research involving shuffling symbols endlessly on the green screen of his obsolete machine into the depths of the night. From a romantic vision of escape through collective libidinized action, he had seemingly arrived at a cold and largely unproductive abstract practice, pursued in isolation. Or, one could say, he had returned to a kind of poetry, albeit a poetry subtracted from all expression and all meaning. And yet it is a mark of what Mark Fisher has called Land's 'reckless integrity' that, once he had whittled down his problematic to this minimal kernel, he gave himself up entirely to it. He would eagerly impart his latest numerical findings to those who still listened; but invariably they did not follow.

Let's get this out of the way: In any normative, clinical, or social sense of the word, very simply, Land did 'go mad.' Afterwards he did not shrink from meticulously documenting this process, as if writing up a failed experiment.[7] He regarded the degeneration of his 'breakthrough' into a 'breakdown' as ultimate and humiliating proof of the incapacity of the human to escape the 'headcase,' the prison of the personal self. Wretchedly, for Land, it was no longer possible to tell whether his speculative epiphanies had been (as he had believed at the height of his delirium) glimmers of access to the transcendental – or just the pathetic derangements of a psyche pushed to the derisory limits of its tolerance. The experiment was over.

When I contacted Land about the republication of his works, he did not protest, but had nothing to add: *It's another life; I have nothing to say about it – I don't even remember writing half of those things ... I don't want to get into retrospectively condemning my ancient work – I think it's best to gently back off. It belongs in the clawed embrace of the undead amphetamine god.*

Land had published one book during the brief career that ended when he was 'retired' from Warwick in the late 90s. In 1992 there had appeared *The*

Thirst for Annihilation,[8] a book on Georges Bataille that could better be described as a book *with* Bataille. Spending a good amount of the first chapter excoriating secondary scholarship for its timidity, Land goes on to chart his own 'inner experience' in communing with Bataille's lacerating thought. Throughout the book, philosophical analysis disintegrates periodically into poetry, self-loathing and atheistic rants. *Thirst* remains well-regarded in certain circles, and is even talismanic for some who come across it in their search for fierce, transgressive literature. It is certainly a unique and powerful book. For many of us, however, it never captured the breadth and inventiveness of Land's work during the mid- to late 90s. With *Fanged Noumena* the disparate works written during this period were at last brought together, and for the first time the trajectory of his thought could be charted and its philosophical import appreciated. Writing the introduction together with Ray Brassier (also a former student of Land's, a penetrating and original philosopher, and one who has never disowned the 'embarrassing' legacy of Land's influence), I realized how much Land's charisma and reputation – and his own tendency to dismiss philosophy *tout court* at every opportunity and to bait his enemies with hyperbole – had prevented any systematic *philosophical* appreciation of his work. As discussed above, his work may have exerted most of its influence in other spheres. But it should be recognized that this influence is ultimately rooted in the penetrating and original nature of his rethinking of how to do 'philosophy.'

Here was a young lecturer, working in arguably one of the most staid disciplines in the academy, who in the mid-90s energetically addressed issues that at the time were decidedly *outré*, but are now a staple of debate: biotechnology, radical Islam, the internet as an addictive drug, the rise of China as an economic power – all make appearances in *Fanged Noumena*, in texts penned while Land's peers rattled on about (at best) poetry and painting, Presence and the history of metaphysics.

Land opened up new possibilities at a time when 'Continental Philosophy' was beginning a sclerotic decline into institutional factions, each with their respective masters and their voluminous Bibles, their initiation rites and liturgies. He gave us another way to read the history of philosophy that made it fierce, communicative, connective and alive. Of course, his eventual collapse was occasion for the system to move in and heal the wound, in effect erasing all trace of this other path. But it is being rediscovered by a new generation of thinkers who, grown tired with philosophy's incarceration within 'the text,' are returning to the question of 'thinking the outside.'

Land's uncompromising work also had – and retains – the power to polarize. On the one hand, leftists find indigestible its reckless aspect – the celebration of capitalism for its power to dismantle tradition, hierarchy and organisation. But by this token it presents a bracing alternative both to pious, benighted humanist ethics and to the voluntarist politics of the miraculous 'event' peddled in recent years by Badiou and others. On the other hand, rightwingers equally deplore Land's irresponsibility and his abandonment of the pretense that the vector of capitalism is linked constitutively to any positive human program.

Now working as a journalist in Shanghai ('neo-China' as he used to write, in the days when its futuristic skyline was but a fevered anticipation on his part), Land still occasionally issues online commentaries, formulated in a unique journalistic-speculative alloy.[9] And they still attest to his unique talent for addressing the surface of the contemporary globe in direct and informed terms, without renouncing the philosophical ambition to construct a 'universal history' of this global insanity.

One of Land's more memorable theses has it that, owing to the positive-feedback process of capitalism's artificialisation of the Earth, this process doubles its intensity in ever-decreasing periods:

> Converging upon terrestrial meltdown singularity, phase-out culture accelerates through its digitech-heated adaptive landscape, passing through compression thresholds normed to

an intensive logistic curve: 1500, 1756,1884, 1948, 1980, 1996, 2004, 2008, 2010, 2011 …

Nothing human makes it out of the near-future.

[...]

Garbage time is running out.

Can what is playing you make it to level 2?

('Meltdown')[10]

For Land, such theoretical propositions were also machines for excitation, devices to meld with and accelerate the planetary intensification that would finally allow the 'body without organs' to shed its human skin. If Philosophy thereby becomes a species of hype (or 'hyperstition,' according to the CCRU's neologism) then are Land's detractors (now, as then) right to say that his outlook is ultimately indistinguishable from a passive acceptance of a 'neoconservative' agenda – that his theoretical advocacy of the 'acceleration' of the capitalist process, in practice, simply endorses the maintenance of capitalist power structures rather than their dismantling (whether revolutionary or ameliorative)?

It is indeed true that Land's attempts to reach the intensive burncore of the planetary process, by hooking up conceptual thought to libidinising cultural energy, was always balanced between a romanticism of abolition and a dubious desire to identify with the 'exciting' and 'intense' phenomena presented by capitalism. Land gradually abandoned as too-conservative even Deleuze and Guattari's 'cautious' division of capitalism into a 'good' destratifying or deterritorialising side and the 'bad' mechanisms of reterritorialisation. In the name of a non-negotiable hatred for the fetters of the human, he may have risked wholesale capitulation to the new powers (all-too-human) that take hold of the earth as soon as its old power structures are dismantled – and which make use of every base reflex of *homo sapiens* for their own, ultimately banal, ends.

But to take this point of view is to avoid confronting the most potent aspects of Land's thought. His heresy was twofold: it consisted not only in his attempt to 'melt' writing immanently into the processes it described, but also in his dedication to thinking the *real process* of Capital's insidious takeover of the human (and the legacy of this process within philosophy) – and in admitting the laughable impotence of 'man' in the face of this process. In this respect he has not yet been 'proved wrong,' despite a recent upsurge in wishful thinking. His work still poses acutely – in a variety of forms – the challenge of thinking contemporary life on this planet: A planet piloted from the future by something that comes from outside personal or collective human intention, and which we can no longer pretend has anything to do with reason or progress.

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[1] See 'Barker Speaks,' *Fanged Noumena,* 493-505.

[2] 'Katasonix,' *Fanged Noumena*, 481-91.

[3] 'A Dirty Joke,' *Fanged Noumena*, 632.

[4] London: zer0 Books, 2009.

[5] Melbourne: re.press, 2008.

[6] On the CCRU, see Simon Reynold's article 'Renegade Academia': http://energyflashbysimonreynolds.blogspot.com/2009/11/renegade-academia-cybernetic-culture.html

[7] See 'A Dirty Joke,' *Fanged Noumena*, 629-34.

[8] London: Routledge.

[9] http://www.thatsmags.com/shanghai/news-features/urban-future-blog.

[10] *Fanged Noumena*, 443.

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27.02.2013 13:40

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David | 19.07.2013 01:30

Would love to see an update or extension of this piece that takes into some account of NL's recent spate of writings and self-positioning as a "neoreactionary" at his new blog Outside In.

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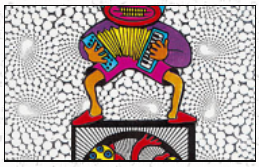

MIKROB

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Goshka Macuga: The Nature Of The Beast. Whitechapel Gallery, London.

Lizzy Le Quesne

In her installation The Nature of the Beast London based Polish artist and 2008 Turner Prize nominee Goshka Mucuga has created a unique venue for public gatherings. Boldly setting her own sculpture alongside one of Picasso's greatest masterpieces, and an assortment of past and current documentation, this forceful new work speaks of complex, historically informed, human drives. The work explores…

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Ernesto Muñiz: Altars In The Middle Of An Urban Guerrila Warfafe

Jorge Flores-Oliver

No art is more easily recognizable to a traditionally Catholic town than religious art (this in spite of the damage the said religion has suffered due to the proliferation of church-sects that have robbed it of vital space throughout the years). The hordes that overstuff the churches every weekend have accustomed their eyes to the rather gory paintings and sculptures of bloody Christ carrying…

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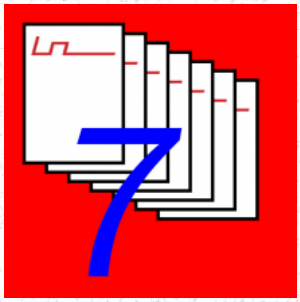

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